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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 06 TIRANA 000411

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [AL](#)  
SUBJECT: UIGHURS (AND OTHERS) IN ALBANIA

REF: 05/08/2008 KOTHEIMER-THIEDE E-MAILS

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SUMMARY  
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¶1. (SBU) The Government of Albania accepted eight former Guantanamo detainees as refugees -- five Uighurs, and one each Algerian, Egyptian, and Uzbek. All the refugees now live outside Albania's Babrru Refugee Center in apartments rented for them by the GOA. The GOA is providing language and vocational training. It pays the refugees a monthly stipend. The former detainees have faced some bureaucratic hurdles in documentation and receipt of assistance. The GOA has appointed a social worker to assist them, but his powers are limited. These benefits ermanent housing, jobs, and documentation which allows travel. They, their lawyers, and the ICRC have contacted the Embassy. Poloffs met with two of the refugees on May 21. END SUMMARY.

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CURRENT STATUS OF THE REFUGEES  
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¶2. (U) As is publicly known, the GOA has hosted eight former detainees since their release from Guantanamo. Five Uighurs arrived in Albania in May 2006. An Uzbek, Algerian and Egyptian arrived in November of that year. The former detainees have acquired refugee status and have relocated from the Babrru Refugee Center. Most have studied Albanian, and some speak it with some comfort. The Uzbek speaks excellent English; one Uighur and the Algerian may also speak English. The GOA has begun a second course of Albanian language studies for all but the Egyptian, who has requested an Albanian-Arabic speaker for a teacher. The UNHCR has agreed to try to find such an individual. Three Uighurs are taking vocational training as auto mechanics. Two refugees are regular participants in the Tirana Hash House Harriers, which has a Russian-speaking "club" where they have been welcomed.

¶3. (U) One Uighur, the Algerian and the Uzbek are studying

at the private University of New York in Tirana. According to the Uzbek at a May 21 meeting with Poloffs, the studies of all three individuals are funded by friends or relatives outside Albania. The GOA found apartments for the refugees, who all live in the same building, according to the ICRC. The GOA recently increased the monthly stipend to the refugees to 40,000 lek (about \$510), which is their allotment to pay for phone and electricity charges, rent, and all expenses. (The increase resulted from the increased cost of living.) The eighth refugee, a Uighur, was able to travel to Sweden, where he has a sister, and has sought asylum there according to local media reports. The GOA also appointed a social worker, Mr. Drini, to help the refugees integrate. Similar benefits are not available to other refugees in Albania.

¶4. (SBU) The Egyptian, who has a Sudanese family, is, according to ICRC representatives, the most challenging case with a "complicated personality." In a December 2007 meeting with Pol-econ chief, Matthias Weinreich, the ICRC-Skopje head

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of mission who leads efforts for the detainees, was concerned that the Egyptian might be unstable. In May 2008, Weinreich had a longer conversation with the refugee through a translator and found his condition improved. However, the Egyptian has few local contacts outside the mosque and is not seeking work. (Note: Weinreich is not a medical professional. He has long experience in refugee work and seeks to be objective. He speaks Russian and Arabic and so can interact directly with some of the refugees.)

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OUTSIDE INTEREST  
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¶5. (SBU) The ICRC has helped with reintegration since May 2006, originally visiting approximately every two months with a small team, including professional Uighur and Arabic translators. Alternate visits were without interpretation. We learned of ICRC's involvement and met Weinreich in December 2007; we saw him again in May 2008. ICRC shares the findings of its visits with Albanian authorities and the UNHCR in Albania. The ICRC's interest in the refugees was to facilitate initial steps of integration into host country society. Weinreich told us the ICRC would be closing its Macedonia office. He may remain through 2008, and if so he would visit the refugees again. However, ICRC contact with the refugees will decline under any circumstances.

¶6. (SBU) Post has also been contacted by various lawyers for the refugees. Asked by some of them to find an appropriate USG contact point, we learned from Department (ref) that post should not engage directly with the lawyers. We shared the Department of Justice contact provided by Department and informed them of our inability to continue direct contacts. We have also heard sporadically from journalists interested in the case and from private citizens who want to help the refugees. We have been unable to provide much assistance or information in these cases. ICRC's Weinreich was pleased to learn of the lawyers' interest as he said they would be a more appropriate contact for the refugees now that "ICRC had reached the limits of mediation." He said the Center for Constitutional Rights in the U.S. was an organization that had taken interest in Guantanamo detainees and had helped to collect funds for some of those in Albania, as well.

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FROM THE REFUGEES THEMSELVES  
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¶7. (SBU) Recently, some of the refugees sought contact with the Embassy. They showed up unannounced three times asking to see someone and spoke with the A/RSO. Post was unable to accommodate the unscheduled demands for a meeting. A/RSO asked the refugees to put their concerns in writing. (The text of the letter from the refugees, dated April 21, follows

at para 18.) When they returned and seemed unwilling to leave, he explained that they could not simply loiter outside the Embassy; doing so could prompt removal for security reasons. The Uzbek (Zakir) then called Pol-Econ section chief, who met him and one of the Uighurs (Abu Baker) together with Post's Human Rights Officer on May 21.

¶18. (U) The Uzbek translated for his Uighur companion. Both were polite and seemed reasonably cheerful, all things considered. They complained repeatedly of the unhelpful attitude displayed by the Ministry of Interior's (MOI) Refugee Director, Drita Avdyli. One complaint was that when individuals from Europe had arrived to see them and offered help, Avdyli prevented contact on the ruse that the refugees did not speak English, but assured the would-be benefactors that the refugees were well. They said Avdyli had provided

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no assistance, made their lives much more difficult and refused to forward their complaints. They said Mr. Drini, the social worker, was only allowed to bring them their money, but had no power to resolve their concerns. They added that the UNHCR shared their frustration with Avdyli, but told them they were unable to do anything about her.

¶19. (U) The refugees told us that before departing Guantanamo, they were told "in two months (from arrival in Albania), you will have a house, a job, money, documents. You will have everything." Zakir added that he asked how much money he would have and was told he would have enough to stand on his own two feet. They said they were not asking for anything for the four and a half years in Guantanamo, but wanted help to face the future. The charge of terrorism has made it impossible for them to find jobs or marry, they said. They referred repeatedly to a "promise from the State Department" and "an agreement between the U.S. and Albania." They said that the previous refugee director told them "you will have more than others and you will have all in the agreement." (Note: The lawyers have used similar phrasing in contacts with Embassy.)

¶10. (U) In the meeting, the refugees pressed three main concerns: permanent housing, documents that would allow travel, and jobs. The Uighur also said having their families or being able to marry would be important. He said one Uighur had tried to marry twice. The Albanian women's fathers had rejected him, one for being a terrorist and the other for having no home to offer. Zakir said if they had no homes, they would have to camp in front of the Embassy. (We discouraged that as an option.) They also referred to the possibility of starting their own restaurant, but noted the extremely high cost of buying or investing in a property to do so. The monthly stipend is not enough for rent, electricity, food, and savings on top of that, they explained. Zakir complained that, despite the fact that he has not been using electricity in the warm weather, the GOA still charged \$120/month for electricity. (The refugees attempt to reduce their electricity use in order to have more money left for other things; what is not spent on electricity goes to them.) He said when they complained, they were told that meter readers simply make up amounts to charge customers. We noted this was unfortunately a common Albanian experience.

¶11. (U) At the close of the meeting, the refugees pressed us for when they would receive a reply from State. While we promised to convey their concerns, we urged them not to wait for a reply before beginning to consider how they might best get their lives in order.

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ICRC EVALUATION  
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¶12. (SBU) Weinreich was somewhat concerned with the refugees' situation in December 2007. He was frustrated by an apparent unwillingness by the MOI -- Avdyli or Secretary

General Nuri, who had previously been helpful -- to meet, despite repeated attempts well in advance of his visit to set an appointment. The refugees were having considerable difficulty determining where to get their identification documentation renewed. They believed they were being overcharged for electricity and could not get receipts for electricity payments made by the GOA on their behalf. There were delays in delivery of their monthly stipends. In subsequent meetings with the GOA, we urged them to live up to their obligations to these and all refugees, noting that as well as the moral obligation, embarrassing articles about GOA treatment of the refugees could be distracting in the (then)

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run-up to a potential NATO invitation. We urged the GOA to meet its responsibilities to important international NGOs such as the ICRC. We also advised Weinreich to utilize the ICRC's own contacts in the MOD and MFA (from other projects and responsibilities) to facilitate the contacts it needed.

¶13. (SBU) In May 2008, Weinreich reported no further difficulties making contact with GOA officials. He characterized the refugees as "reasonably well off." Their situation was "definitely not about life and death, or strong suffering." He said there would likely be periodic bouts of depression and concern; this is not uncommon in similar situations. He said depression in refugees can come in waves. Physically, they were well and had adjusted. Weinreich said he understood the refugees to be deeply worried about their future. They feared they may end up sleeping in the streets. Most, he believed, were more or less willing to integrate. He confirmed (nonjudgmentally) that the refugees expect assistance from U.S. authorities.

¶14. (SBU) The refugees had outlined for Weinreich essentially the same three concerns they did with us. They want to be able to travel. ICRC had explained, as we did, that the problem was not strictly one of documentation; nonetheless, the refugees pressed the ICRC for U.S. help to obtain expedited Albanian citizenship. Weinreich said that according to the UNHCR, acquiring Albanian citizenship is normally a five-year process, unless a person marries an Albanian. In the case of marriage, the process is reduced to three years. The refugees had asked the GOA to give them houses. While with Poloffs the request was for more general employment, with ICRC they particularly focused on help getting a restaurant.

¶15. (SBU) Weinreich noted that this last request indicated some thought, initiative, and willingness to integrate. While neither ICRC, UNHCR, nor the GOA (nor, presumably, the USG) is able to give them money to buy a restaurant, if the lawyers could tap into private interest and work through a group like the Center for Constitutional Rights, it might be possible to raise funds to help the refugees, he mused. Weinreich observed that when information about the refugees is shared, the reaction of most people (Albanians and others) is one of sympathy.

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COMMENT

¶16. (SBU) As ICRC noted, the refugees are not at this time destitute or suffering. Their monthly stipend is fairly comfortable by Albanian standards. The bureaucratic hurdles they have encountered are not uncommon for any Albanian, but the refugees are at a disadvantage culturally and linguistically to face them. A poor Albanian might have a family network for support, live at home, or have a house with room to grow or raise some supplemental food.

¶17. (SBU) Post does not have the human or financial resources to provide full-time social work assistance to the eight refugees, although we can follow their condition periodically as a human rights issue. In some of the communications we have had with private citizens (usually by

e-mail), we have noticed a desire to help these individuals. Department may want to consider whether to encourage the lawyers, together with the Center for Constitutional Rights, to develop a fundraising/support network for the detainees. (The Center for Constitutional Rights can, according to ICRC, facilitate delivery of money or goods.) While there are potentially negative PR considerations to such an idea, the unfavorable PR from media attention to unhappy refugees also

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could be a bar to other countries we may want to consider future resettlement. The prospect of eight ex-detainees camping at the Embassy's front door, being dragged away by the Albanian police, is another PR nightmare to be avoided.

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LETTER FROM THE REFUGEES  
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118. (U) Begin text, letter to Embassy from refugees:

April 21, 2008 Tirana

American Consulate:

We, Abu Bakker Kasim, Ahtar Kasim Basit, Ayub Haji Memet, and Ahmet Adil, four of us, have been in Albania for two years by the arrangement of the United States of America. You told us in Guantanamo (sic) that by two months in Albania you would help arrange passports, housing and find us work. As of today Albania has not given us passports (with the documents that they did give us we are unable to even venture out from our present place). As for housing they gave us a place to live for two years. After two years have passed it is still not settled where we will live.

We told all this to the Albania interior ministry. We told them if they could not give us work then please give us some finances so we can start our own business and make a living. The person there named Dirita told us that their country doesn't have any welfare money. So six months ago we gave a written request to the UNHCR asking for money to open up a restaurant. At that time Huseyin (UNHCR worker) said they would help us. But now Husyin says it takes a lot of money to open a restaurant and that by themselves they cannot get enough funds. He told us to write to the American Consulate and request help, saying he would talk with you also to get some help.

Dirita, from the Albania interior ministry, said that they will only give us rent and money to live on for two years, and then we are on our own.

To the Head of the Consul:

We originally put great hope in America and Albania, but now we haven't obtained anything. On the contrary, Dirita Avdyli from the Albania interior ministry has falsely told everyone that we eight people are doing well. The groups that would help us have all disappeared and have withheld the things that would help us. Every month the money we get to live on comes late. If we don't phone them asking for it for one or two days they don't bring it.

If after two years Albania doesn't give us the opportunity to make a living or give us a stable home, where will we live, what will we eat then? Dirita has not given us enough funds to study language and she says that they don't have money.

Three of us ) Abu Bakker Kasim, Ahtar Kaim Basit, and Ahmet Adil Totimiz have asked for funds to open a restaurant.

If the UNHCR and you do not help us with the things necessary to live, passports and funds to open a restaurant we will be unable to make a living because to rent an place for one month costs from \$200-300. Electricity and water are at least \$60. With only \$40 left how can we survive?

Dear sir/madam, being taken to Guantanamo (sic) has destroyed our lives. Although in the end we were acquitted of any wrong, we still have not been given the opportunity to live a

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normal life. On the contrary our lives are turned upside down by people's prejudices.

So we are asking the American government and the American Consul to give us the opportunity to live peacefully. Please help us straighten out our lives. If the United States of America and Albania are unwilling to help us with getting a home, passports and work, please move us to a better country.

We are appealing to the American Consulate because the government of Albania only does what the American government tells them to do. We've come to understand this very clearly. They will not help us on their own. From now on we will not talk with Dirita Avdyli at the Interior Ministry because it doesn't help and we are tired of it. Now we are seeking the American Consulate to help us.

Sincerely

/s/

Ayoob Haji Mohammed

End text.  
WITHERS